

THE ROLE OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN INDUCTION PROGRAMS

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The purpose of induction programs is to provide logistical, emotional, and teaching support to ease a new teacher's transition from student to professional. Anticipated effects include the strengthening of teaching practice and increased retention rates. The Marian Bergeson Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) System, California's set of induction programs, has required the inclusion of formative assessment, along with support, from its beginning in 1993.

A formative assessment system includes three components: standards, evidence, and criteria. California induction programs use the California Standards for the Teaching Profession to guide formative assessment. The use of *standards* strengthens induction in several ways: Standards give beginners and the experienced teachers supporting them a common framework and language with which to discuss teaching. Standards also give beginners a comprehensive picture of the various facets of teaching as an occupation. For example, the standard "Developing as a Professional" includes elements addressing professional growth and working with parents and colleagues. These aspects of teaching sometimes get lost in beginners' struggles with planning, instruction, and assessment. Standards also provide a focus for the work of beginning/experienced teacher pairs, especially when the experienced teacher is supporting a new teacher for the first time. They help set a broader context for thinking about specific challenges, such as how to handle a frequently disruptive student. This context helps teachers relate their concerns to central goals of teaching, such as establishing and maintaining standards for student behavior.

The use of *evidence* anchors formative assessment in an individual teacher's practice. The purpose of evidence is to capture a sample of teaching practice so beginners can examine and reflect on it. Evidence includes observation data, artifacts such as lesson plans, and samples of student work. Observation data extends a teacher's eyes and ears beyond what they are able to perceive on their own while they are teaching.

To be credible and useful, it is important that evidence be as "objective" as possible. This means that the evidence is recorded and initially examined in descriptive terms with little inference. The experienced teacher plays the role of a photograph, tape recorder, or reader. For example, in an observation, the experienced teacher would record "9:05 T: 'Please return to your seats.' 9: 07 All students in seats with eyes on teacher" rather than "Transition went smoothly." After a portion of the evidence is selected for discussion, interpretations of it are developed in a reflective conversation with the beginning teacher. The experienced teacher uses such strategies as questioning techniques, paraphrasing, and the introduction of overlooked evidence to stimulate and guide the reflective conversation, as needed.

The process of examining evidence in the light of standards increases new teachers' abilities to make interpretations and judgments about their own teaching. Reflection on

evidence should help beginners identify strengths as well as areas of improvement so they get a comprehensive picture of their teaching practices. Often beginners are so focused on what is not working that they take their areas of competence for granted. Not only does this inappropriately reduce their sense of efficacy, but it prevents them from using areas of strength to work on their weaknesses.

Criteria, such as the Santa Cruz Continuum or the CFASST Descriptions of Practice, identify different levels of practice with respect to elements of a standard. Criteria help establish a developmental continuum from unacceptable practice to accomplished practice. They help beginners form a realistic picture of their practice. Criteria can help new teachers take pride in their beginning practice without leaving the impression that no further development is needed. Comparing the level at which their practice was documented with the next level helps beginners target specific and realistic strategies for growth. A beginner does not have to aspire to accomplished teaching practice overnight, but can target an intermediate level toward which to work.

It is important to remember that formative assessment is not the only component of an induction program. Tightly linked standards, evidence, and criteria lose their value without a knowledgeable experienced teacher who can help focus the beginner's attention on important evidence and connect identified needs to a variety of sources of support. Formative assessment provides a portrait of teaching practice to inform support. It provides an avenue for a beginner and an experienced teacher to engage in dialogue on teaching practice through the lens and language of the standards. It helps experienced teachers go beyond "buddy" style mentoring that depends on one teacher's opinions and use a more systematic and valid approach to helping beginners. Because formative assessment is grounded in a common system of standards and criteria as well as specific evidence of an individual's teaching practice, it helps give experienced teachers the confidence and legitimacy to engage in critical conversations about teaching.

Because the use of formative assessment with other teachers is a new role for most experienced teachers, preparation and support for this role is critical. Preparation addresses strategies for establishing a supportive relationship with a beginner, the collection and interpretation of evidence against standards-based criteria, as well as strategies for conducting reflective conversations.

When formative assessment is well done, beginners develop the habit of trying to improve their teaching through reflection on standards-based evidence. New teachers have a more comprehensive and complex picture of teaching from familiarity with the standards and their application to teaching practice. They have a realistic picture of the efficacy of their teaching practice and areas to target for professional growth. When coupled with effective support that gives beginners a variety of ways to pursue growth, formative assessment helps induction programs not only retain new teachers, but improve their teaching and establish a commitment to continuous self improvement.